

## Remarks at the Premiere of “Ragtime” April 26, 1998

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, when we were being ushered up the aisle and backstage and we were preparing to come up here, I was full of ambivalence, frankly. I wanted so badly to come up here and thank Garth and the magnificent cast, musicians, people backstage, everybody who had anything to do with this unbelievable gift we have been given. I wanted to thank the leaders of the Democratic Party and the staff. I wanted to especially thank all of you for being here and for making this weekend, celebrating our 150th birthday as a party, a success. But I was absolutely convinced that anything I would say would be a complete anticlimax after the wringer they have put us through today. [Laughter]

I was thinking on the way over here about the time when Mr. Doctorow published this magnificent novel, over 20 years ago now, and Hillary and I were young law professors living in the mountains of north Arkansas. And I read the book almost immediately after it came out. I couldn't put it down. I just sat there, read right through it. And after it was over, I felt just as I felt after the show was over.

But I don't think even then I fully grasped the life force behind the stories in “Ragtime.” And I think what I would like to say to you is that, yes, this is the story of America, and it reminds us that we have a good system and the best ideals, but we always fall a little short. And the story of our country has to be the continuing effort to overcome our own individual flaws and imperfections and tendency to fall into injustice and bigotry and oppression and greed and shortsightedness or just plain tone-deafness, but that there is also a part of the human condition which makes us vulnerable as people.

I was walking down the aisle and several of you said, thank you so much for what you did to try to help the Irish peace process along. And then I saw the representative of my ancestors, the Irish fireman here—[laughter]—playing the heavy. We got a book last week, Hillary and I did, entitled “How The Irish Became White.” [Laughter] And it basically talks about how, when the Irish immigrants first came here, they really identified with the African-American slaves because they were treated the same way, and they had much the same experience.

I say that to remind us all that there will always be the tendency of people to abuse power if they can abuse it. That's why we have a Constitution which seeks earnestly to limit that. And all of us will always have our imperfection, and so will our children and grandchildren and their grandchildren. The thing that makes America great is that we have the right ideals and that through history we have constantly sought to overcome our own limitations, to stand for deeper freedom, to stand for wider opportunity, to stand for a more perfect Union.

And I hope that all of you will always remember what you saw on this stage tonight. I hope you will never, ever abandon what brought you here to this performance tonight. And I hope all of your lives you will try to create more of the joy you saw here, eliminate all the oppression you can, and be very proud to be both an American and a Democrat.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:30 p.m. at the National Theater. In his remarks, he referred to Garth H. Drabinsky, chairman and chief executive officer, Livent, Inc.; and author E.L. Doctorow.

## Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner April 26, 1998

Thank you. Thank you very much. Let me see, we have now seen a magnificent musical rendition of a wonderful novel. We heard two

fine speeches. If I had any sense, I would sit down. [Laughter]